

Herndon heard the news of the assassination with the rest of Springfield, on the morning of April 15, 1865. "It is grievously sad," he wrote, "to think of—one so good—so kind—so loving—so honest—so manly & so *great*, taken by the bloody murderous hand."

He had long toyed with the idea of writing a biography of his partner, but for all his high spirits and generous nature Herndon was, at bottom, a feckless man, and for months he contented himself with being Springfield's foremost authority on Lincoln "as he really was." He was a celebrity overnight. Journalists and aspiring biographers queued up to see him, and he would talk as long as they cared to listen; often longer.

But when he saw what these earliest chroniclers wrote with the tales and observations he had generously bestowed, he was horrified. The first articles and biographies were soupy and sentimental, containing errors of fact both large and small and, what was worse, errors of judgment, too: in none of them could Herndon discern the complicated man he had known. The biggest selling of the early biographies—one hundred thousand copies—was by a newspaper editor and Sunday school teacher named Josiah Holland. His view of Lincoln was soaked in folklore and Christian piety; presented with a real man of strong passions, relentless ambition, and ambivalent religious views, Holland had delivered to his readers a prairie Saint Francis. Herndon thought Holland, who had spent an afternoon in the law offices interviewing him, just made it all up.

"[Holland] asked me many questions in relation to Mr. Lincoln," Herndon later wrote. "I answered all willingly and truthfully. He then

asked me—‘What about Mr. Lincoln’s religion,’ and to which I replied—‘the less said the better.’ He then made this expression—‘O never mind, I’ll fix that’ with a kind of wink and nod.”

Part of Herndon’s resentment was mere pride: no one, he thought, quite appreciated Lincoln the way he did. He resolved to set the record straight by writing the true Lincoln biography—telling “the inner life of Mr. L.,” as he put it. Quite apart from their long friendship, Herndon had great faith in his ability, which he thought verged on the mystical, to discern the motives of the inner Mr. L. It’s a faith that nearly every buff, and scholar, has shared since.

Yet he also knew there were facts of Lincoln’s life he didn’t know. So Herndon began digging, and over the next two years he performed one of the greatest feats of research in American history; it is impossible to imagine the great body of Lincoln literature without it. Herndon traveled to the scenes of Lincoln’s boyhood and young manhood, in Indiana and Illinois, and picked through the ruins of the cabins where the Lincolns had lived. He sought out the surviving countryfolk who had watched Lincoln grow up. He prodded their memories and painstakingly set down their recollections. If there were places he couldn’t travel to or sources he couldn’t reach, he activated his national network of fellow Republicans to find a local contact who could do the reporting for him. “Get *all* the facts,” he instructed them more than once.

In September 1865, less than five months after Lincoln’s death, he went to the farm where Lincoln’s stepmother lived, forty miles from Springfield. It was the only interview the old woman ever gave—she died three months later—and an excerpt from Herndon’s notes gives you a taste of his method, and of the indelibly human material he collected.

Friday—Old Mrs. Lincolns Home—8 m South of Charleston—
Sept 8th 1865

Mrs Thomas Lincoln Says—

Abe was about 9 yrs of age when I landed in Indiana—The country was wild—and desolate. Abe was a good boy; he didn’t like physical

labor—was diligent for Knowledge—wished to Know & if pain & Labor would get it he was sure to get it. He was the best boy I ever saw. I can't remember dates nor names—am about 75 yrs of age. . . .

Abe read all the books he could lay his hands on—and when he came across a passage that Struck him he would write it down on boards if he had no paper and keep it there till he did get paper—then he would re-write it—look at it repeat it. . . .

He was here—after he was Elected President of the US. (Here the old lady stopped—turned around & cried—wiped her Eyes—and proceeded.) He never told me a lie in his life—never Evaded—never Equivocated never dodged—nor turned a Corner to avoid any chastisement or other responsibility. He was dutiful to me always he loved me truly I think. I had a son John was raised with Abe. Both were good boys, but I must Say that Abe was the best I ever Saw or Ever expect to see.

From Herndon's interviews grew the Lincoln that most Americans have come to know: the prairie boy bent on self-improvement, hungry for knowledge, kindly, humorous, upright, tireless, and loyal; the young shopkeeper and postmaster of New Salem; the rising citizen of the state capital, feeling his way through the complexities of law and politics; then the statesman; then the martyr.

But there was more. Herndon's informants told him of failed romances in Lincoln's early life; of his lack of religious piety; of psychological depressions leading to thoughts of suicide. The inner Lincoln, whose complexity Herndon prided himself on grasping, was even more complicated than he had guessed. Herndon's cache of notes and letters eventually grew to several thousand pages. He knew the value of what he had collected. In his rush to release it to the world he postponed writing a full biography and planned instead a series of lectures in Springfield. The first three, on the "character," "patriotism," and "statesmanship" of Lincoln, were great popular successes and soon published as pamphlets.

Then Herndon returned to his book and . . . and one thing led to another . . . and time passed . . . and his passion for the project cooled. Lethargy set in. He needed money. He grew disillusioned with the practice of law. He decided to try his hand at farming. The transition from city to rural life consumed more time than he expected, and the farm didn't pay as he hoped and . . . many years passed. In the meantime, Herndon sold access to the treasure trove of notes to a few other acquaintances who picked through it, extracting material for their own biographies.

One other factor may have spooked Herndon out of completing his biography. The reception to his fourth lecture in Springfield had alarmed him. A few old residents of New Salem had told Herndon the story of a star-crossed romance between young Lincoln and the daughter of a local tavern owner, Ann Rutledge, who had taken sick and died before they could be married, in 1835. Though Lincoln had never mentioned the affair to Herndon or, for that matter, to any other of his closest friends in Springfield, it did explain many aspects of Lincoln's character that Herndon found otherwise unaccountable: the great man's recurring melancholy, his fatalism, and above all his marriage, undertaken by default, to a woman that Herndon thought unworthy of him. Even better, the episode cast Lincoln's entire life with a patina of tragedy that appealed to Herndon's own fatalism and romantic nature.

When Herndon made this the subject of his next lecture, Springfield was scandalized. Friends loyal to the widow turned on him. The widow herself was deeply wounded. "This is the return for all my husband's kindness to that miserable man," Mary Lincoln wrote to a friend. "Out of pity he took him into his office, when he was almost a hopeless inebriate and . . . he was only a drudge in the first place."

As Herndon's fortunes and reputation declined he continued to receive journalists and historians, and one of them, a young Hoosier named Jesse Weik, finally persuaded him, in the early 1880s, to return to the biography. Herndon would furnish the research and the psychological insight, and Weik, a fine writer, would cast the narrative. After

a struggle of several years the book was published in 1889, nearly a quarter of a century after Herndon had begun his researches. For Herndon, publication of a project so long in gestation proved a grave disappointment. With poor sales at first, it did nothing to reverse his financial difficulties. Yet it more than fulfilled his ambition in another respect. *Herndon's Lincoln*, as the book is now known, became the touchstone for all future attempts to understand Lincoln, as even the most fastidious modern historians acknowledge. It is "the essential book," as one Lincoln biographer, David Herbert Donald, put it; "the indispensable biography," in the words of another, Don Fehrenbacher.

Don E. Fehrenbacher, an astonished historian, actually read all these books and reported on them in an essay, "The Deep Reading of Lincoln." He pointed out that it was one thing for Herndon and Herndon's contemporaries to try to reconstitute Lincoln's inner life; they at least had the advantage of having known their patient. It's far more presumptuous today, when we can rely only on Herndon's written materials. And even Herndon acknowledged the greatest obstacle he faced: Lincoln himself. "Lincoln never poured out his soul to any mortal creature at anytime and on no subject," Herndon confessed. "He was the most secretive—reticent—shut-mouthed man that ever existed."

Yet you can't really blame contemporary historians. Nearly every biographer since Herndon has declared his intention, as Herndon did, to "get beyond the myth" of Lincoln, to do away with the "plaster saint," to prove he was "a man, not a God," to "humanize" him, to demystify the "icon." And when he sets about the task he finds Herndon's treasure trove waiting to be sacked, offering items to fit nearly every interpretation. And indeed the treasure trove of oral history has only expanded in recent years, as other nineteenth-century accounts and interviews have been discovered and admitted as evidence into the court of history.

Consider the case of young Billy Thompson as one final, small example of how the attempt to plumb the real Lincoln, drawn from long-ago reminiscence, can stymie even the most accomplished and reliable historians.

I was reading along one day in *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, one of the subtlest Lincoln biographies, published in 1999 by the historian Allen Guelzo. In passing, Guelzo makes the point that Lincoln was often personally aloof and chilly—a man preoccupied with abstractions who, in Herndon's words, “had no idea—no proper notion of particular men & women.” To support this view, Guelzo quotes “Billy Thompson,” who grew up in Lincoln's Springfield neighborhood. “[Lincoln] was not an observant man on the street; in fact he hardly ever saw us unless we spoke to him. He walked along with his hands behind him gazing upward and noticing nobody.”

Interesting, I thought. An abstracted, impervious Lincoln, quite different from the usual picture of kindly old Abe!

Then, a week or so later, I was reading *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*, by the brilliant historian Michael Burlingame, who devotes a chapter to how kind and attentive old Abe was. I came across Billy Thompson again. In fact, it was the same quote, used to make the opposite point.

Burlingame omits the first sentence that Guelzo takes from Billy (“[Lincoln] was not an observant man . . . he hardly ever saw us unless we spoke to him”). Instead Burlingame begins the quote with the second sentence Guelzo uses: “He walked along with his hands behind him gazing upward and noticing nobody.” Chilly Abe!

Yet then the quote continues: “But it was usual for all of the boys in the neighborhood to speak to him as we met him. He had endeared himself to all of us by reason of the interest he took in us. When one of us spoke to him as he was walking along in his absorbed manner he would stop and acknowledge the greeting pleasantly. If the boy was small Mr. Lincoln would often take him up in his arms and talk to him. If the boy was larger Mr. Lincoln would shake hands and talk with him.”

Kindly old Abe!

The same quote, from the same source, in the hands of two careful historians, used to sketch contradictory pictures of Lincoln. And to top

it off: Billy's testimony was published in 1916, more than a half century after Lincoln's death, in a book of testimonials compiled by a journalist, Walter B. Stevens, who is known to have falsified several of the entries, perhaps including Billy's.